

RECONSTRUCTING THE SEMINAR: AN ADAPTATION OF PHILOSOPHY FOR CHILDREN MATERIALS AND METHODOLOGY

Abstract

This paper describes the use of Philosophy for Children materials and methodologies in the restructuring of the Graduate Seminar in Art and Design at Purdue University.

Among the curriculum areas which share some of the concerns of Philosophy for Children is art education. Art education in the United States, for the past sixty years or so, has been an education of doing, of making a variety of things through using various materials and techniques, all of which, rightly or wrongly, are called "art." For the past twenty-five years, there has been a theoretical shift in art education which advocates curricular inclusion of other ways of knowing art or about art aside from the manipulation of media from a formalistic and/or expressivistic point of view. These other ways of knowing include experiences with art history, art criticism, and, of course, aesthetics. During this decade, this theoretical push has at last begun to show up in practice in some art programs. This result is in large measure due to the efforts of the Getty Foundation for Education in the Arts, a heavily-funded organization which has embraced this approach to art education and has supported research into its implementation.

Of the various "new" parts of art education in this approach (dubbed "Discipline-based Art Education"), the discipline of aesthetics has been the most troublesome in terms of curriculum development and implementation. Most art teachers now in the field were never trained in aesthetics at all. In fact, there seems to be somewhat pervasive confusion on the part of many inservice art teachers as to what aesthetics actually is. For instance, many confuse "aesthetic" as an adjective (as in aesthetic perception, something they know about enhancing) and "aesthetics" as a noun, a discipline with substantive content and modes of inquiry. In looking for ways to help prepare teachers (both inservice and preservice) to deal with aesthetics and to couch the issues of aesthetics in terms understandable, not to mention palatable, to children, I have investigated Philosophy for Children. My participation in the August, 1988, Mendham session gave me a sense of what Philosophy for Children is and how it does what it does. That experience has had direct influence upon how I perceive the role of aesthetics in art education for children, how I think art teachers can be best prepared to deal with aesthetics, and, unexpectedly, how I deal with graduate students in a seminar I teach in critical theory each fall. It is the latter concern with which I will deal in this paper, in large part because it is the one with which I now have the most practical experience.

Like students in United States public school programs in art, undergraduate art majors at many institutions receive an education steeped in doing, that is, in manipulating media and techniques to make various art objects. It is possible to complete some undergraduate programs in the visual arts, knowing how to create products which "work" in a visual manner, without being able to discuss why they do what they do, at least on other than a formal level. There are several reasons for this state of affairs (and these reasons apply as much to public school art education as to undergraduate education in the visual arts). First, the pervasive emphasis upon the rather technocratic manipulation of the principles and elements of design (concepts like line, shape, color, balance, rhythm, and the like) is largely a result of the bastardization of the theories of the Bauhaus movement. That influential pre-war system of design education advocated the quasi-scientific exploration of the capacities of various media and their effects upon the relationships of visual elements. The Bauhaus-trained individual understood such

concepts in terms of what they meant to good design of objects. "Form follows function" is a well-known adage of the group. However, when the Bauhaus approach was transported into the art education programs of the United States, it was often seen as a way to prepare students in areas foundational to all the visual arts, not just design. Somehow, when translated into the beginning classes required of all art majors, the Bauhaus emphasis upon exploration of media and design elements resulted in an educational program rather devoid of idea. In other words, many students are trained to produce formally strong (or at least acceptable) images with little or no real content other than the form itself.

Second, the romantic notion of the artist and art (widely held since the late 19th century) is one which allows for, indeed celebrates, the idea of the idiosyncratic genius who produces works which are inspired (even if not divinely so). Such highly personal works defy the need for verbalization. In fact, probing too deeply and too critically on the part of such an artist is seen as dangerous; it may result in a deadening of the artistic process.

Third, many students remain unreflective about what they do in the studio because they are following a pattern of doing what past professors have encouraged them to do. Students often clearly parrot the style and unabashedly appropriate the subject matter of these professors (or those of a favorite artist) without any clear notion of content or idea. In other words, they lack experience in examining the assumptions underlying what they do in the studio.

Many of the masters level students who take my seminar are very able artists who are inexperienced in talking about art, their own or that of others. Similarly, they lack experience in discussing the underlying critical issues of the visual arts. It is my job in the seminar to provide at least an introduction to both processes. The first time I taught the class (prior to my experiences with Philosophy for Children), I followed the typical pattern of bringing in guest artist who showed and discussed examples of their work, gallery owners who told what they looked for and what kind of a cut they expected for work sold, and critics who tended to lambast everything regional. These experiences were interesting, but nothing seemed to fit together particularly well. In the end, I could not claim to have helped anyone understand very clearly or more profoundly what it means to be an artist.

Following the Mendham session, I was taken with the idea of trying to develop a community of inquiry in the graduate seminar. I realized that only through dialogue and reflection could the students come to understand more clearly some of the critical issues in art and the work of an artist. I explained the general premises of a Philosophy for Children discussion and my own perception of the potential for developing a community of inquiry in the seminar. We discussed why the artist needs to be reflective about art and needs to examine the values, goals, and functions of art in a critical manner. This was a charge for the group, but equally important was the personal challenge for each student to reflect critically upon her or his own aesthetic assumptions and values, so that individual artmaking would arise from an examined source.

In order to facilitate this understanding and critical reflection we began with a sharing of information about the students' background, their expectations of the graduate school experience, and their aspirations for the future. We also shared examples of our own artwork (I did as well). In a certain sense, the group recreated the Mendham experience in that there was great diversity in nationalities and in modes of working (painting, photography, sculpture, filmmaking, and printmaking) represented. This process helped the students to get a sense of the group and proved invaluable throughout the course.

We read several episodes from the Philosophy for Children novels which deal explicitly with aesthetic issues and used some of the manual exercises to facilitate

discussion. However, students found that they had a lot to say about the issues embedded within the episodes and preferred to work without the exercises. Nevertheless, those processes also proved valuable in establishing a sense of the kinds of things that might be open to discussion and the kind of discussion which was desired.

Students purchased a very large (too large, I now know) set of photocopied readings which ranged from standard classics in aesthetics to examples of contemporary criticism. Each week they were assigned readings and were asked to keep journals. The journal entries were to record their ideas about the issues in the readings, to describe and/or analyze other things happening which impacted upon their understanding (such as work with another professor or an exhibit they attended), and to record their responses to questions posed about the readings. The writing was a great help to students in understanding the readings and better formulating their positions regarding views or ideas expressed in the readings. Secondly, students were to come to class with a list of questions or points they wished to discuss. These were put on the board in typical Philosophy for Children fashion. Because the readings were so complex and full of issues, we often had great numbers of questions on the board. But, perhaps not surprisingly, there were some points or issues which recurred throughout the semester and we became increasingly aware of the relationships among them. For instance, the role of intuition in the conceptualization and production of visual art was a topic of great interest to students. As one student put it, "I am never quite sure where I am going in my work at any given point. But when the experience is real, it is like walking a tightrope over an abyss. I know where my next foot has to go, but that is all. And once it is there, I know where the next one must go. But that is all."

Another recurring issue was how one judges one's own artwork--how do we know what is of value, what is good? I found that I liked to use the notion of recognition in response to my own work. It is like having a baby without all the sentiment which typically is associated with that experience, in that one recognizes the work when it is good and/or authentic as a woman recognizes a baby when it is finally born: "Oh, it was you."

Also, students were genuinely concerned with the issues of the relationships of the artist and society, the artist and audience. As we investigated these issues, it became apparent that the students carried a mixed bag of modernist assumptions about art and artist and what might be termed a postmodernist concern with success (read money) and fame. Most seemed drawn ideologically to the shifting demands that art be difficult, somewhat inaccessible, and disturbing to the broader audience. Anything else is analgesic, consolatory. To the public at large, modernist art has tended to imply a loss of craft, a fraud, or a hoax. We may accept with good grace that we do not understand calculus or Chinese, but in the case of art it is more likely, as Roger Fry once pointed out, that people will think, when confronted with a work they do not like and cannot understand, that it was made especially to insult them.

On the other hand, many of these students carried the ideal of making a living by selling art or, if they were more practical minded, the dream of finding a university job which allows time to pursue one's own work without financial problems (ha!). The educational system in the United States fabricates as many graduate artists every five years as there were people living in 15th century Florence. New York City art dealer Ivan Karp says that he interviews about 100 artists per week, all looking for a gallery. He considers about 90% of those individuals fully professional artists (Gablik, 1985).

In trying to come to terms with all these issues (and I have not mentioned the classic ideas of art as symbol or art as significant form or art as expression or the more contemporary ideas of relativism in the arts and sciences which we discussed), the students developed strong kinships with each other. As some of their romanticized assumptions about art and artists came under scrutiny, they turned not only to personal

reflection, but also to a bonding with one another. Both these acts should serve them in good stead.

Student evaluations of the course were overwhelmingly positive, but by no means should I imply that this was a totally positive experience for anyone. Some students were very frustrated by the readings, not only in terms of idea but also of form. More fundamentally, some students were terribly disenchanted. What I thought should be an empowering experience of reflection and inquiry was for some a frightening look at the shallowness of their work to date. One woman in particular did not want to talk about any of these experiences because the discussion left her feeling lost: she no longer was satisfied with what she thought and did, but she was not sure how to fill the remaining void. She eventually dropped out of the graduate program, leaving me with very mixed feelings. However, the end result of the seminar experience was largely very positive and I plan to use this approach again next year, modifying the readings, of course. It is now my favorite class to teach.

This modification of the graduate seminar in art and design has been an unexpected and very happy result of my experiences with Philosophy for Children. I hope it may be taken as a clear indication of the applicability of Philosophy for Children materials and methodologies for many subject areas and many student levels.

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REFERENCES

Gablik, S. (1985). Changing paradigms: Is the ladder of success a dead end for artists? New Art Examiner, 12(9), 20-23.

